DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 128 CS 217 202

AUTHOR	Gupta, Abha
TITLE	What's Up wif Ebonics, Y'all?
INSTITUTION	International Reading Association, Newark, DE.
PUB DATE	1999-06-00
NOTE	10p.
AVAILABLE FROM	http://www.readingonline.org.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Black Dialects; *Black Students; Classroom Techniques; Elementary Secondary Education; English Instruction; *Language Role; Standard Spoken Usage
IDENTIFIERS	*African Americans

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the controversy surrounding the use of Ebonics among African American students in schools in the United States, with a twofold purpose: (1) to focus on the primary function of language as a tool of communication that varies in its use according to the social context; and (2) to provide suggestions to teachers of ways to support students' acquisition of standard English without devaluing the nonstandard variants they may have learned in their homes and communities. The discussion is highlighted in the paper with classroom stories, anecdotes, and vignettes. The paper contains the following sections: Introduction; The Ebonics Controversy; Black English: A Dangerous Label; Focus on Function, Not Form; Strategies for Teaching "Conventional" English; A Balanced View of Language; and Useful Links on the Subject of English Variants. Contains 12 references. (Author/NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 443 128

What's up wif Ebonics, Y'all?

by Abha Gupta

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

J. M. Irwin

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS 217 202

What's up wif Ebonics, Y'all?

Abha Gupta

Note: After reading this article, please visit the transcript of the discussion forum to view readers' comments.

Abstract

This article examines the controversy surrounding the use of Ebonics among African American students in schools in the United States, with a twofold purpose: (1) to focus on the primary function of language as a tool of communication that varies in its use according to the social context; and (2) to provide suggestions to teachers of ways to support students' acquisition of standard English without devaluing the nonstandard variants they may have learned in their homes and communities. The discussion is highlighted with classroom stories, anecdotes, and vignettes.

The article contains the following sections:

- Introduction
- The Ebonics Controversy
- Black English: A Dangerous Label
- Focus on Function, Not Form
- Strategies for Teaching "Conventional" English
- A Balanced View of Language
- Useful Links on the Subject of English Variants
- References

Author Information

Gupta is an assistant professor at the Darden College of Education, Old Dominion University (Norfolk, VA 23529, USA). In addition to teaching graduate courses in reading, language, and literacy, she directs the university's Reading Center and its America Reads Program. She can be reached by e-mail at agupta@odu.edu.

Reading Online, www.readingonline.org
Posted June 1999
© 1999-2000 International Reading Association, Inc. ISSN 1096-1232

What's up wif Ebonics, Y'all?

Abha Gupta

Note: After reading this article, please visit the transcript of the discussion forum to view readers' comments. For a list of *Reading Online* postings on topics related to this commentary, click here.

> "I knowed you wasn't Oklahomy folks. You talk queer kinda -- that ain't no blame, you understan'. Ever'body says words different," said Ivy. "Arkansas folks says 'em different from Oklahomy folks says 'em different. And we seen a lady from Massachusetts, an' she said 'em differentest of all. Couldn' hardly make out what she was sayin'."
> John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath,* quoted in Marckwardt (1958, p. 131)

In my after-school reading class of at-risk first graders, I casually asked if anyone knew where Lamonte was. He hadn't shown up for two weeks; I was concerned. Shaunte immediately replied, "Unh, aanh! He ain't comin' no more!" Apparently his family had moved away. Andrew then jumped in: "That's wrong! You should say, 'He is not coming no more'!" To this, Shaunte responded authoritatively in a slightly irritated, high-pitched voice, "That's what I said. 'He ain't comin' no more'!"

This exchange will be familiar to anyone who teaches in an average classroom in any fairly diverse community in the United States. The specific situation and topic may vary, but the form of language will be similar. This particular dialogue caught my attention because it took place right after the launching of the "Ebonics" debate, sparked by one school board's resolution regarding "black English." I had begun to notice frequent explicit "corrections" -- both teachers correcting students, and students correcting one another, as was the case with Andrew and Shaunte.

Back to abstract

The Ebonics Controversy

In a 1997 resolution, the Linguistic Society of America describes Ebonics as a "systematic and rule-governed" language variety spoken by many African American students. The LSA resolution goes on to say that Ebonics (also known as African American Vernacular English [AAVE] and Vernacular Black English, as well as other names), like all human linguistic systems, is "fundamentally regular":

> The systematic and expressive nature of the grammar and pronunciation patterns of the African American vernacular has been established by numerous scientific studies over the past thirty years. Characterizations of Ebonics as "slang," "mutant," "lazy," "defective," "ungrammatical," or "broken English" are incorrect and demeaning.

Linked here is an audio file (351K) containing a sample of Ebonics.

In December 1996, the Oakland (California) Unified School District Board of Education attracted wide media attention by passing a formal resolution that acknowledged Ebonics as a legitimate language variant and advocated its promotion within some of Oakland schools' programs. Controversy erupted immediately, with a wide spectrum of community leaders and media -- right- and left-wing, black and white -- deriding a policy they held as placing Ebonics on equal footing with standard English. Oakland quickly amended its resolution, notably changing the original wording of one point from

> BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language whether it is known as "Ebonics," "African Language Systems," "Pan-African Communication Behaviors" or other description, and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English

> language skills....

to the following:

> BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for the combined purposes of facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills, while respecting and embracing the legitimacy and richness of the language patterns whether they are known as "Ebonics", "African Language Systems", "Pan African Communication Behaviors", or other description....

The controversy continued, despite the fact that the Oakland resolution only put into words ideas supported by respected research of long standing. Language is clearly important in all areas of education; there are, however, differing viewpoints on how it should be taught. The Verbal Deficit Hypothesis assumes that a child who speaks a nonstandard linguistic form is wrong, that her language is inadequate for success in school and thus needs to be replaced or changed. On the other hand, the Verbal Difference Hypothesis (Williams, 1970) suggests that teachers view a child's language not as a problem to be fixed but as a resource for learning.

Responding to linguistic and cultural diversity of children enrolled in early childhood education programs, the National Association for the Education of Young Children adopted a position statement that emphasizes, among other things, that "for the optimal development and learning of all children, educators must accept the legitimacy of children's home language." Au (1993, p. 133) notes, "Standard English does not replace the home language but is available to students as an alternate code to be used in school and work settings when it is necessary and appropriate to do so."

When we insist that our students use only language we deem to be "correct," we may well cause children not to talk at all for fear of being "wrong." When this happens, we lose a necessary ingredient in teaching, for if children are fearful of talking, then we have little access to what's going on in their minds. And we have little way of helping them gain access to standard English. By acknowledging Ebonics, Oakland's school board was trying to secure that access and the future success of its students.

Back to abstract

Black English: A Dangerous Label

The controversy over Ebonics has died down in the past year. But black students continue to speak it, and they also continue to score consistently lower than their white counterparts on standardized tests of reading and math (see, for example, Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1988). Are the two related? Some would note that the only obvious difference between the two groups, besides skin color, is oral language. African American students frequently speak a dialect that differs from standard English, and white students frequently speak a dialect closer to standard English. It is argued that the reading problems of many black children result from the incompatibility between the structure of their variant dialect and the language system of standard English represented in written material. But consider the following scenario:

> A fourth grade teacher met with a reading specialist to discuss her concerns regarding students who had not done well on a reading test. She said she felt "accountable" for those students and wanted to discuss the "reasons" behind their low scores. As the two educators went through the list of names, the teacher offered labels to explain each child's "problem": "Those three have attention-deficit disorder. She's been diagnosed as learning disabled, and he's being evaluated for dyslexia. Those two speak English as a second language." The accountability issue was raised again with each designation, when the teacher and reading specialist discussed what special services might be available for each child. When she came to one name on the list, however, the teacher paused. After a moment, she whispered, "I think maybe her problem is Ebonics."
>
> The reading specialist pointed out that there were other AAVE-speaking children in the class, some of whom had scored well on the test. The teacher shrugged off the response, but added, "But those kids don't have a problem in reading; plus, most of their parents would be on their backs if they messed up on the test." The student in question, it turned out, lived with a grandmother while her mother worked

two jobs. Neither grandmother nor mother had ever been to a parent-teacher conference.

"Ebonics" may provide a convenient label, but blaming an oral dialect for low academic performance is simplistic. Researchers such as Shirley Brice Heath (1983) have shown that many factors come into play in literacy acquisition. Au (1993, p.124) notes that, in her research, "the primary barriers to school literacy learning did not lie in the details of sounds, grammar, and vocabulary. Instead, the barriers were those created by schools' failure to acknowledge and appreciate students' home cultures and to build upon the interactional styles and everyday use of language with which students were already familiar."

Back to abstract

Focus on Function, Not Form

The primary function of language is communication. "He ain't coming" and "He isn't coming" effectively communicate the same thing and, indeed, their grammatical structure is identical despite the phonological variation. But in our attempts to get students to use the correct form, we often lose sight of the meaning they are trying to convey. And, in the process, the emphasis on correction can become overwhelming.

Recently, while playing a language game with a small group of first graders in an after-school class, I paused to ask, "How many of you say 'ain't' -- as in 'They ain't gonna come'?" The students all gave me an "are we in trouble" look, and only one hand started tentatively upward. Then I raised my own hand up and said, "You know, I've said it many times myself." Reassured, seven of the eight children raised their hands toward the ceiling. Then Michelle added, "You should say, 'They should not gonna come -- ' No, 'They *is not* gonna come -- ' No.... Dr. Gupta, can we play now?" Michelle's attempt to get the correct form became frustrating for her, so she gave up and asked that we return to our game.

Or consider this situation. I once sat in on a reading circle in a fifth-grade classroom where students were discussing Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia,* a beautiful piece of literature that tells an emotional story. One of the main characters in the book, Lesley, has an accident and dies. Some of the students found this hard to accept. In the middle of the discussion, Marcus said, "No, Lesley ain't dead -- she pretendin'." Jamar, sitting next to him, gave a worried "Uh, oh!" and looked at the teacher. Suddenly, there was pin-drop silence. Apparently, the class had had a lesson earlier that day on how wrong it was to use "ain't." The teacher looked at me and said, "Well, since Dr. Gupta is here, why don't we ask her opinion."

I knew what the issue was, but I decided to keep my focus on meaning. "If Marcus thinks that Lesley was only pretending," I replied, "I'd like to know from him why he thinks so." The teacher then asked explicitly for my opinion on "ain't." I replied that, in my view, it wasn't wrong -- Marcus had communicated his meaning, which is the purpose of language. It was, perhaps, not the best formulation in the context of a classroom literature discussion, however, in that we need to learn to use language much as we learn to "dress for the occasion."

The teacher then turned to the students and said, "Class, you can see that we have a difference of opinion: I think 'ain't' is substandard and I want you to speak standard English. You will not get good jobs using 'ain't'."

And here I had to agree with at least some of what the teacher said. I would not use *substandard* to describe the word "ain't," for it suggests that language is either right or wrong. This prescriptive view places us in an either-or position, and few things in life are either-or. There is, after all, no standard spoken English in the United States. Well-educated people in the southern states may say "kain't," for example, but they will certainly write *can't* or, in more formal situations, *cannot*. They know what forms of language to use in different contexts. One of our jobs as teachers is to help students recognize those contexts, and I would agree that using vernacular such as "ain't" when conducting a job search is probably not going to result in a high degree of success.

Standard English is the language of power in the United States. If we want to ensure that all our students have access to the benefits of that power, it is important that they learn how and when to use the conventional language form. This does not mean, however, that their home language -- Ebonics, in the case of many African American children -- needs to be lost or devalued. For these students, Ebonics is the "correct" language variety to use in many contexts. By telling them that their language is wrong, we are not only

undermining their confidence and criticizing their culture, we are confusing them in their growing understanding of language.

Consider something that happened in that same fifth-grade classroom later in the year. Each student was involved in publishing a story. Nicole wrote a beautiful piece about her great-grandfather, who had died of "black lung." In her draft, she included a song that he used to sing:

> It ain't gonna rain no more, no more,
> it ain't gonna rain no more.
> How in the heck
> can I wash my neck
> if it ain't gonna rain no more?

During the editing stage, Nicole "corrected" the song, replacing the "ain'ts" and "gonna's" with "is not" and "going to." She simply applied the rules that she had been taught. Because the rules were not presented in context, she had no understanding of when they ought to be applied.

Back to abstract

Strategies for Teaching "Conventional" English

Many teachers and parents voice the concern that if students' use of nonstandard language is not "corrected," the correct form will not be learned. Yes, students' linguistic behavior should be guided by teachers, but we need to consider when, where, and how "correction" occurs. We as teachers need to be aware of our own assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes toward various linguistic forms and the groups that use them. Our beliefs set the tone for our classroom culture. We can and should discuss the "language variation" issue -- school language versus home language versus playground language -- with students at the start of the school year to establish an atmosphere of understanding and to move away from notions of absolute right or wrong in language usage. Then, we can use teaching strategies that provide guidance in standard English while underscoring the importance of the nonstandard varieties that students might speak.

The following instructional strategies can be used to guide students in their literacy learning and development. Each highlights language as a way of constructing meaning, and most are student directed. A lesson on vocabulary, grammar, or usage can emerge out of learning from each of them, rather than as an isolated, add-on item.

Writing workshops. When Jamie wrote, "Them girls will come to my house for a sleepover" in a story, the teacher set up a miniconference with her. The teacher asked, "What's another way to say this sentence?" With hesitation, Jamie responded, "Those girls will come to my house?" Agreeing with Jamie, the teacher nodded, "Yes, that's another way of saying it when you're talking to someone. Here, though, you can say, 'The girls will come to my house for a sleepover,' since you already mentioned which girls are being referred to."

The process approach to writing provides an excellent opportunity for direct instruction in grammar, vocabulary, and spelling (Calkins, 1986). During conferences with students (individually, in small groups, or as a whole class), differences between oral and written language forms can be discussed. Students connect this to their background knowledge and the experience they bring to the writing task. Revisions the teacher notes while students are working at the editing stage can be used as a springboard for a minilesson on style and grammatical forms. Sometimes, more formal, whole-class lessons emerge when teachers notice that several students are having similar difficulties.

Many teachers use "morning messages" (Kawakami-Arakaki, Oshiro, & Farran, 1989) for highlighting specific skills in writing and oral language. In a morning message, the teacher writes the day's schedule on an overhead projector, thinking aloud as he does so. For example, the teacher might say, "Why did I put a comma here? Why is this a new paragraph? This doesn't sound right. How can we rephrase it?" Students provide the responses. The whole activity takes just a few minutes. Teachers can decide which aspect of the writing process to focus on -- whether language vernaculars or some other area of concern.

Dictionary. One effective way of helping students become aware of different linguistic forms is by asking them to create their own dictionaries. Many African Americans come to school speaking the rule-governed language called "Ebonics." Teachers and students can develop a class Ebonics dictionary of vocabulary and pronunciation and a guide to its structure. Students can be encouraged to enter parallel forms of standard and nonstandard vocabulary. The class dictionary then becomes a resource students can turn to when in doubt, especially during writing time. (Visit http://www.dolemite.com/ebonics/index.htm dictionaries for an online Ebonics - standard English dictionary; a standard-English-to-Ebonics translator is available at http://www2.firstsaga.com/casbeer/ebonics.htm.)

Wall charts. Creating wall charts of frequently used nonstandard structures or vocabulary and their parallels in standard English is another method of demonstrating to students the importance of their linguistic forms. The wall charts also help students when they are revising their writing and help in self-correcting. The charts can emerge and grow as new situations come up. There could be charts for morphological, syntactic, and phonological categories. For instance, *wif* and *with* at the phonological level, or *them girls* and *those girls* at the syntactic level. Students can find other examples from friends or relatives who grew up in different geographic locations or sociocultural environments and who may therefore use words differently. For example, Wolfram (1981, p.48) lists a variety of terms used to name a shelter for hogs and pigs -- hog pen, pig sty, hog crawl, pig pen, hog lot. If Internet access is available, students can use e-mail to interact with students across the United States or in other English-speaking countries, thereby broadening their understanding of linguistic diversity within social contexts.

Themes. Some teachers create themes on cultural and linguistic diversity. For instance, a class could have picnic or go on a field trip during which they are encouraged to dress and talk informally; another day could be designated "dress-up" or "formal," and students could be asked to behave formally and make use of standard English. In one preschool, students pretended to take an airplane flight to a different country each week; the country they "landed" in became the theme for that week. Natives of that country were invited to the class to discuss cultural and linguistic differences. Other possibilities include role-plays in which students act out going shopping, ordering in a restaurant, or visiting a doctor, where each situation requires a different language form and has its own social rules.

Literature in the classroom. There are numerous benefits associated with using children's literature in the classroom (see, for example, Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland, 1997). As Au (1993, p. 176) points out, "Multiethnic literature can be used to affirm the cultural identity of students of diverse backgrounds and to develop all students' understanding and appreciation of other cultures." (For more on the benefits of multiethnic literature, see http://www.ipl.org/ref/QUE/PF/kidmultilit.html.)

In addition, the use of different language forms can be demonstrated by exposing students to particular authors and texts. For example, in *Huckleberry Finn,* Mark Twain shows how social belief systems of communities can be based on language use. Such literature can be read aloud and discussed to make students aware of different genres, techniques of creating dialogue and using language for a purpose, and writing for a particular audience.

Dialogue journals. With this technique, students write about their ideas in a notebook, focusing on a topic of their choice. The notebooks are then handed to the teacher, who responds in writing to each entry. No corrections are made, but teachers may deliberately include target words and appropriate grammar in their responses to demonstrate the standard form. The journals are returned, and students read the teacher's comments. They next entry may be a response to the teacher or may take an entirely new direction. This technique provides students with a nonthreatening way of communicating with the teacher (Peyton & Reed, 1990). The journals can be a great resource for displaying evidence of a student's developing language system and as a springboard for minilessons or writing conferences. This is also an excellent way to get to know children and to become aware of any problems they may be facing.

Back to abstract

A Balanced View of Language

Rules are embedded not just in language, but in the social contexts in which language is used. As literacy

educators, we must provide students with access not only to the forms of standard English but also with an understanding of when those forms are appropriate. Failing to do the latter only causes uncertainty -- as shown in the writing of students like Nicole -- and does not bring about any underlying change. We have all had the experience of "correcting" a child's "ain'ts" over and over, only to hear him continue to use the word. The child has not internalized the difference, has not understood it at what Noam Chomsky (1965) termed the level of "deep structure."

The reading and writing performance of students with diverse dialect backgrounds can be substantially improved only if teachers communicate respect and show sensitivity toward the many vernaculars of English. When we question the language that people use, we are questioning their worth. We need to equip students to question an educational system that devalues their lives and their knowledge by telling them that their home language is "wrong." At the same time, we must provide students with access to and understanding of additional and alternative language forms. But as Lisa Delpit (1997; online document) states succinctly, "access will not make any of our students more intelligent. It will not teach them math or science or geography -- or, for that matter, compassion, courage, or responsibility. Let us not become so overly concerned with the language form that we ignore academic and moral content. Access to standard language may be necessary, but it is definitely not sufficient to produce intelligent, competent caretakers of the future."

Back to abstract

Useful Links on the Subject of English Variants

Besides the sites linked within the preceding text, the following URLs may prove useful to those looking for additional information.

- http://www.arches.uga.edu/~bryan/AAVE, a site created by a student at the University of Georgia, USA, provides a detailed overview of African American Vernacular English and includes a list of related links.
- The sociolinguistics pages (http://logos.uoregon.edu/explore/socioling/) at the Explore! Linguistics site of the University of Oregon, USA, provide an explanation of various social aspects of language use.
- Although the English First organization actively opposes promotion of Ebonics, its website (http://www.englishfirst.org/ebonics.htm) nevertheless provides useful links to related sites and media reports of the issue -- as well as a look at the other side in the Ebonics debate.
- The Department of Translation Studies at the University of Tampere, Finland, has an extensive list of links to media reports and general information sources on the Ebonics issue at http://www.uta.fi/FAST/US8/EBO/ebonics.html.

Back to abstract

References

Applebee, A.N., Langer J.A., & Mullis, I.V.S. (1988). *Who reads best: Factors related to reading achievement in grades 3, 7, and 11.* Princeton, NJ: National Assessment of Educational Progress, Educational Testing Service.
Back

Au, K. (1993). *Literacy instruction in multicultural settings.* San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.
Back to The Ebonics Controversy
Back to Black English: A Dangerous Label
Back to Strategies for Teaching "Conventional" English

Calkins, L.M. (1986). *The art of teaching writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
Back

Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Back

Delpit, L. (1997, Fall). Ebonics and culturally responsive instruction. *Rethinking Schools: An Urban Educational Journal, 12*(1). Available online at http://www.rethinkingschools.org/Archives/12_01/ebdelpit.htm.

Back

Galda, L., Cullinan, B., & Strickland, D. (1997). *Language, literacy and the child.* San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.
Back

Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Back

Kawakami-Arakaki, A., Oshiro, M., & Farran, D. (1989). Research to practice: Integrating reading and writing in a kindergarten curriculum. In J. Mason (Ed.), *Reading and writing connections.* Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
Back

Marckwardt, A.H. (1958). *American English.* London: Oxford University Press.
Back

Peyton, J.K., & Reed, L. (1990). *Dialogue journal writing with nonnative English speakers: A handbook for teachers.* Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
Back

Wolfram, W. (1981). Varieties of American English. In C. Ferguson & S.B. Heath (Eds.), *Language in the USA.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Back

Williams, F. (1970). *Language and poverty.* Chicago, IL: Markham.
Back

Author's Note: I would like to thank Prof. Robert Jennings for his contributions to this article.

Back to abstract

Readers who enjoy this article might also be interested in the following postings:

- Literacy in Multicultural Settings: Whose Culture Are We Discussing?, a commentary by Angela Ward
- Teaching Multiculturalism by Deborah A. Wallace
- The New Face of Literacy in Asia by Ng Seok Moi
- Gaining Cross-Cultural and International Perspectives, a book review column by Linda D. Labbo

Back

Back to abstract

Go to the discussion forum

Reading Online, www.readingonline.org
Posted June 1999
© 1999-2000 International Reading Association, Inc. ISSN 1096-1232